



Health Standard for Perchlorate in Drinking Water Too High, Panel Says

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WASHINGTON — A panel of scientists concluded Monday that perchlorate, a toxic chemical used in rocket fuel and explosives, is safe for consumption at levels 20 times greater than the standard being considered by the Environmental Protection Agency.

In a report expected to influence a final EPA regulation on the chemical, the National Academy of Sciences supported a level of contamination closer to that favored by the Pentagon, and not the more stringent rules sought by environmentalists and some Democrats.

The study comes after years of disagreement over how dangerous it is for people to consume water tainted with perchlorate, a pervasive leftover of Cold War defense manufacturing that has been found in drinking water in 35 states.

The EPA currently has no final pollution standard for perchlorate in drinking water. The chemical can inhibit thyroid function and is considered particularly dangerous to children.

The NAS panel recommended allowing a level roughly equal to 20 parts per billion in drinking water. Two years ago, EPA issued a preliminary recommendation of 1 part per billion. Parts per billion is a common water quality measurement.

The academy's report criticized the agency's methods of evaluating health risks.

"The committee disagrees with EPA's conclusion and thinks that perchlorate exposure is unlikely to lead to thyroid tumors in humans," the panel said in a statement accompanying its report.

Environmentalists disputed the academy's conclusion and accused the panel of being pressured by the Pentagon and the defense industry.

"The recommendations don't make sense if our goal is really to protect children and the environment and not to protect the military and our contractors," said Gina Solomon, a senior scientist at Natural Resources Defense Council.

In a conference call Monday, the council said documents obtained under Freedom of Information Act requests showed that the Pentagon and the White House sought to influence the scope of the academy's study.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat, said the administration's friendships with special interest groups are standing in the way of public health.

"The administration routinely downplays the health risks of perchlorate despite the well-documented risks it poses to the physical and mental health of children," Boxer said in a statement.

While the chemical also is found in nature, the panel said that its presence in the environment primarily comes from the manufacture and use of rocket fuels as well as explosives and fireworks. In many states, pollution from defense sites is blamed for perchlorate in groundwater.

The academy study was ordered by the Bush administration in 2003 to review the stricter standard EPA had proposed in 2002. The Pentagon had criticized that standard as too stringent and recommended one as high as 200 parts per billion.

Local governments around the country already have begun trying to hold defense contractors and the Pentagon liable for huge cleanup costs to rid groundwater of the toxin.

A Pentagon spokesman referred calls to the White House, where Bob Hopkins, spokesman for the Office of Science and Technology Policy, said accusations of improper influence by the administration "couldn't be further from the truth."

The academy defended its work.

"We think our committee has done a fine job. We look forward to the public and policy makers reading our report and the science in it," E. William Colglazier, the academy's executive officer, said in a statement.

Source: Associated Press